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The Revival Of Islam In Central Asia and The Rise Of Religious Fanaticism

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Abstract: The article discusses the situation of Muslims in Central Asia during the Soviet Union era, the government's policies on religion, the influence of political uses of religion within the USSR, and the impact of democratic freedoms and political diversity on religion. It also covers the historical rise of religious extremism.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Central Asia, Revival Of Islam, Religious Extremism, Pseudo-Salafism, Democratic Reforms, Afghanistan.



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Introduction

To study the problem of religious extremism in Central Asia, it's essential to understand the lifestyle of Muslims in the region during the Soviet period, government policies on religion, and the resulting social issues. This helps analyze the historical roots of extremism in the region.

Methodology

After the 1917 Russian Revolution, Central Asian Muslims were cut off from the outside world. Starting in 1926, people who followed Islam faced pressure under a government that restricted freedom of religion. From the 1930s, mosques were closed, and religious practices were limited.

During World War II, social, economic, and moral hardships led to a natural increase in religious feelings. This prompted Soviet authorities to reconsider their stance toward religious Muslims, and in 1942, Islam was officially recognized by Stalin.

During the war years, the government stopped persecuting religious scholars, clergy, and religious groups, and began to address religious sentiments. This contributed to the unity of the Soviet people and led to support for the state government from religious

communities. On July 31, 1943, the USSR Supreme Soviet Presidium issued a decree to establish the "Muslim Religious Administration of Central Asia and Kazakhstan".

According to historian Vincent Furnion, in 1945, the long process of "settling with the indigenous population" changed the classification of the Stalinist state. Instead of Central Asia being "national" in shape and social basis, it began to form into "national-Islamic" Soviet states.

By the 1950s, after Stalin's death and during the leadership of Khrushchev and Brezhnev in the USSR, the Muslims of the region began to reconnect with the Muslim world. This reintegration was strengthened by the Soviet leaders' efforts to use Islam for international purposes and to build relations with the Muslim world, aiming to create a positive atmosphere toward the USSR.

From the 1960s onward, the Soviet Union strengthened its friendly relations with Muslim countries by establishing student exchange programs between educational institutions and hosting various international forums on Islam in the region. As part of this process, students from different Muslim countries began arriving at prestigious Soviet educational institutions. Additionally, international forums related to Islam were periodically held in cities like Baku and Tashkent, further fostering ties between the USSR and the broader Muslim world.

In order to prevent the spread of external religious influences, the relevant Soviet authorities tightly controlled religious activities. On August 18, 1986, the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) signed a final decree titled "On Strengthening the Struggle Against the Influence of Islam." This decision was primarily concerned with the rise of pseudo-Salafi activities in the region and the overall religious situation in Central Asia during the 1980s.

Some researchers argue that despite the measures taken by the Soviet government, during the 1970s and 1980s, certain political Islam ideas began to enter the USSR through intermediaries, such as students coming from abroad. This led to the emergence of clandestine studies on modern Muslim literature and the introduction of "political Islam" ideologies within the Soviet territory.

The efforts of the "Muslim Board of Central Asia and Kazakhstan" to meet the religious needs of the region's Muslims during the period of Communist Party rule began to be forgotten by the end of the 20th century. Specifically, changes in the activities of the religious administration, along with divisions and conflicts among the scholars, became one of the key factors in the shift of the religious and social situation in Central Asia.

In the late 1980s, the social activity of religious organizations and devout groups manifested in various forms across the entire Muslim region of the Soviet Union. The historical and social changes, defined as the expansion of democratic freedoms and political pluralism, also had an impact on the religious sphere.

In the context of the events mentioned above, the historical and gradual foundations of the revival of Islam in the region and the emergence of religious fundamentalism in the post-Soviet space can be linked to the 1980s and the period of Perestroika.

Result and Discussion

The social activism of Muslims, in this case, remained under strict control by the authorized bodies of the USSR. Due to the Soviet Union's status as a strictly atheistic state, the legalization of the struggle against religion, and the recognition of any religion as an alien ideology in society, no significant achievements were made.

The changes of the 1980s led foreign media to report that new Islamic territories had emerged within the USSR, and Central Asia was portrayed as a region of millions of brothers who should join the international Muslim community.

This, in turn, directly influenced the religious and social situation in the Central Asian states. As a result, some scholars who had met with the world's Muslims and drawn inspiration from the international community began to incorporate the new ideas they had acquired into internal discussions.

In the 1980s, the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the war in Afghanistan became another important historical and gradual foundation for the introduction of extremist ideas under Islamic slogans into Soviet society.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Muslims in the USSR began listening to banned radio broadcasts, and connections with the external Muslim community were restored. In society, discussions started about how Islam was not limited to just worship, but also had its views on politics, governance, and the management of society, which differed from the previous Soviet era.

The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in response to its defeat in Iran became one of its greatest mistakes. This is because, during the years of Tsarist Russia's invasion of Central Asia and subsequent repression, there were diaspora communities in Afghanistan consisting of Uzbeks, Turkmen, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and other ethnic groups who had fled from neighboring countries in the region. The Soviet government, in turn, sent its own compatriots to fight against them.

Moreover, as Islam began to reawaken within the USSR and the local population was influenced by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, a country that shared religious, sectarian, and ideological views with the Muslims of Central Asia, was met with strong opposition from the local Muslim communities.

This led to the formation of a sense of dissatisfaction with the government among some individuals who participated in the war. Additionally, it contributed to the spread of extremist views among individuals with radical mindsets in the region, who supported their ideologies by linking them to the war, thereby fostering a perception among local Muslims of the righteousness of their beliefs.

In the late 1980s, the social activism of religious organizations and devout groups began to manifest in various forms across the entire Muslim region of the Soviet Union, including Central Asia, the Volga region, and the North Caucasus. Historical and social changes, which could be described as an expansion of democratic freedoms and political pluralism, also impacted the religious sphere.

In the context of the events mentioned above, the historical and gradual emergence of the revival of Islam in the region, the rise of religious extremism in the former Soviet

Union, and the politicization of Islam in Central Asia can be linked to the 1980s and the period of perestroika.

These developments began to directly influence the religious and social situation in the Central Asian states, leading to the emergence of the following trends in the region. Specifically:

- by the 1980s, with the permission of Moscow, the "Islamic leaders" began to meet with the world's Muslims, and some scholars, who had gained new ideas from international interactions, started incorporating these innovations into internal discussions.
- from the 1970s-80s, the spread of pseudo-Salafi ideologies in the Central Asian region.
- as a result of the competition between certain foreign Muslim states to expand their influence in Central Asia, the activity of funds sponsoring the construction of mosques and various religious institutions in the region sharply increased.

Conclusion

In conclusion, several factors have contributed to the radicalization of certain individuals in the Central Asian region. These include: the formation of religious-ideological pluralism and the freedom of religious propaganda during the Soviet era, despite the lack of local religious traditions; the recruitment of youth to study in foreign Islamic centers, which facilitated the introduction of radical ideologies such as salafism, ikhwanism, and hizbism under the guise of Islam; the cumulative response of religious people to the Soviet Union's atheistic policies aimed at suppressing religions in the last 70 years; and efforts to use various social-political movements and religious organizations in political struggles.

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